

The role of labelling in increasing consumers' sensitivity towards animal welfare: the Italian experience

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Abstract: *As the distance between farmers and consumers grows with increasing urbanization, consumers know constantly less about the way farm animals are raised. However, consumers do care about the way in which their food is produced, including the way farm animals are treated. Increasingly, they require assurances that the well being of animals is taken into account in farming practices. Moreover, in a context of increasing market globalization, animal welfare has also become a global concern. Several surveys conducted in Europe demonstrated that the majority of citizens, although showing significant differences between diverse countries, are interested in animal welfare reared for food production.*

In this framework, the European Union, among the recent initiatives of the Action Plan for animal welfare, envisaged the possibility of introducing a system of certification and labelling based on a common European standard, to enhance transparency in the market for products of animal origin and quality of livestock food chains. Since new legislation could have a profound effect on animals and those who work in the livestock and meat production industries this is a prominent topic for the Italian food industry. The current paper evaluates Italian consumers' sensitivity towards animal welfare standards and examines consumers' interest for an animal welfare label. A survey, on a random sample of 300 food shoppers living in Southern Italy, has revealed that 56% of respondents would like to find animal welfare information on the label, while 21% stated that there is no need for this sort of information.

Keywords: *Animal welfare; Italian consumers; Food Labelling.*

Introduction

Despite the ethical debate concerning the interrelationships between man and animals has been ongoing since at least the writings of philosophers such as Aristotle, with the intensification of animal production practices, focusing always more on improving economic efficiency, in recent years the living conditions of animals farmed for food have become a major policy issue in many developed countries. Indeed the strong social claim in favour of animal welfare has also produced notable changes in the European Union (EU) legislation¹ (Maria, 2006), especially in the topics of animal transport and slaughtering.

However, while recent analysis show that the importance of animal welfare is well recognized by EU citizens (EC, 2007), consumers' readiness to pay a substantial price premium for higher animal welfare standards is still quite limited. Undeniably, various national and European studies (Davidson et al., 2003; McCarthy et al., 2003; Schröder and McEachern 2004; Eurobarometer, 2005; María, 2006) have delivered contrasting results regarding the importance of animal welfare when choosing a food product.

It has to be highlighted, though, that the interpretation of the concept of animal welfare differs considerably between different interest and stakeholder groups, and its conceptualisation is heavily influenced by convictions, values, norms, knowledge and interests (Te Velde et al., 2002; Vanhonacker and Verbeke, 2007).

¹ General interest in legal approaches to animal protection appears to be growing by leaps and bounds also in the U.S.A. (Wise, 2003).

Nevertheless, recently, the link between quality of food and animal welfare has found an important confirmation in the Green Paper, of the 15th of October, 2008 in which the attribute "animal welfare" is recognized as one of the elements that European consumers consider in assessing the overall quality of food products.

In the current scenario, the EU is bearing in mind the possibility of introducing a system of certification and labelling based on a common standard that provides adequate information about the production practices used and their animal welfare implications. This decision follows the indications originated from the 2007 Eurobarometer survey in which consumers were asked how animal friendly products should be distinguished in the market. Final results revealed that 39% preferred written information on the labels, 35% supported the idea of specific logos, and 26% suggested the use of a grading/star system on the food package. Although the majority of European citizens share generally similar opinions in terms of animal welfare attributes (such as space availability, humane transports) and target species needing a higher welfare level, deep differences tied to the country of origin persist related to animal farming conditions knowledge and sensitivity for higher animal welfare standards.

In Italy, despite the fact that the general level of concern about animal welfare is rising, the academic and professional literature has feebly focused on consumers' sensitivity and has been mainly interested to specific inquiries (Miele and Parisi, 1998).

Therefore national policy makers, retailers and producers are keen to gather information on public opinion and behaviour in this field. The present work aims to provide a variety of updated consumer data that are currently missing and could help Italian policy makers and marketers. The study is structured as follows: first, the role of food labelling is reviewed; subsequently, a brief overview of Italian public policies and industry standards regarding animal welfare is considered; then, drawing from the direct survey, on 300 randomly selected shoppers, findings of consumers' sensitivity towards animal welfare are presented. The paper concludes with some practical guidance that could assist marketers and politicians to build more informed choices on Italian consumer knowledge, concern and response to animal welfare labelling.

The role of labelling in increasing consumers' awareness

Food scandals and health scares in recent years have had a significant impact on public opinion, creating widespread concern and a growing interest not only on the attributes that characterize the safety and quality of food but also on animals' breeding and feeding systems. The modern theory of demand holds that the benefit gained from consumption is not derived from the products *per se* but from their particular characteristics (Lancaster, 1975) regarding which adequate and appropriate information is essential to conscious choices of consumption. However considering agrifood products, the market is not always capable of providing consumers with proper information to identify the attributes of a specific product and to check whether they meet their precise needs. This is particularly true for credence² characteristics that cannot be observed and assessed when buying or consuming the product itself (safety, health, provenience, locality, ethical attributes, etc). These credence attributes mainly focus on the quality of the production process and often there are no relevant or appropriate informational cues³ available (Becker, 1999). In these cases, firms may have no incentive to provide consumers with information and shoppers may end up purchasing goods that do not match their preferences. In this context food labels are an integral part of our daily shopping

² Information environment is characterized by whether product's important attributes are search, if consumers can determine a product's quality by examining or researching the product before they buy it (Stigler, 1961); experience if consumers cannot determine the product's quality until they buy and use it (Nelson, 1970) and credence where the consumers cannot judge the quality before and even after he inspects, buys and uses the product (Darby and Karni, 1973).

³ Quality cues are defined by Steenkamp (1997) as informational stimuli that say something about the product; i.e. they are used to evaluate the performance of the product with respect to the consumer demands. Cues can be intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic cues relate to physical aspects of the product whereas extrinsic cues relate to the product but are not physically part of it.

experiences. They are a source of information and most often the first means for directly connecting with a potential consumer. Labelling is particularly useful for credence and experience attributes, because it can transform these attributes into search attributes. In this manner, labelling is a tool of *direct shopping aid* to consumers (Caswell, 1996), because it intends to improve the quantity and often the nature of information available to consumers in their decision making. At the same time for a firm, labelling is one of many advertising options and its labelling decision can be examined just like any other advertising decision (Golan et al., 2000). Moreover, Kotler (1997) state that labelling can perform many different functions: identification, grading, description and promotion of products. Altmann (1997) added to these functions those of branding and labelling of food products which aim to differentiate products from those of competitors by enlarging product attractiveness or assuring the consumer of a certain level of quality. Van Trijp, Steenkamp, and Candel (1997) pointed out that quality labelling is a means to add value to the food product. For Caswell and Padberg (1992), labelling plays important third party roles in the food market system through the influence on product design, advertising franchise, consumer confidence in food quality and consumer education on diet and health. Animal welfare standards undoubtedly fall into the class of credence characteristics and nowadays there is a scarcity of appropriate information for consumers concerning the animal welfare standards. One recent study in the EU indicated the consumers are willing to eat animal friendly food because they associate it with higher quality and health (Eurobarometer, 2007). At the same time these consumers are currently unable to discern the welfare standard of the food they purchase. Moreover, information about animal welfare allow the consumers to gain a more positive perception of the product and increase meat acceptability (Napolitano et al., 2007). In this scenario, a clear label⁴ identifying the level of welfare applied could represent an effective marketing tool and such a system should be based on standardised scientific indicators (EC, 2006).

The effectiveness of welfare labelling in improving farm animal welfare will depend on consumers' responses to a new labelling system and consumer demand for livestock products that embody differentiated levels of animal welfare standards. Labelling referring to animal welfare should be based as much as possible on measurable and replicable animal welfare indicators and not just on the production system used (European Economic and Social Committee, 2007). A valuable animal-friendly label should allow consumers to easily differentiate between products obtained with basic mandatory animal welfare standards and those with higher standards. The basic problem is that currently there is no uniform pattern to effectively explain consumers the standards related to animal welfare.

Italian public policies and industry standards regarding animal welfare

In Europe, animal protection laws are issued and formulated by national governments. However, specific initiatives are produced by the EU which stipulate minimum requirements⁵, through directives, which member nations are obliged to implement through national legislation (Stevenson, 2004; Caporale et al., 2005). The indications contained in the directives identify specific qualitative and quantitative characteristics of the spaces where animals are kept, and detailed breeders' behaviours aimed at minimizing animals' suffering. The development of European legislation over the years has been characterized by an enlargement of the scope of action and by an increase in the number of species covered by definite rules (Macri, 2009). The first EU legislation on this matter was enacted in 1974, a succeeding mile stone is the 1999 Amsterdam Treaty that introduced a specific 'Protocol on protection and welfare of animals'. The EU policy regarding animal welfare took a further push within the last revision of the Common Agricultural Policy in which animal welfare becomes one of the criteria required under the so called "cross compliance", the set of obligations the farmers have to comply in order to receive payments. Also, the new regulation on rural development, Reg.1698/2005, confirms the approach adopted in the medium term reform.

⁴ The EU already has mandatory labelling systems for eggs under which EU table egg producers must label their production system.

⁵ In general, the five freedoms (freedom from discomfort, hunger and thirst, fear and distress, pain, injury and disease and freedom to express natural behaviour) expressed in the Farm Animal Welfare Council, of 1992 guide the work of the EU.

Particularly on Axis 2 there are several measures for the improvement of animal welfare that finance commitments that go beyond what is required by the mandatory cross compliance rules⁶.

Nowadays the most important document on the topic is the Community Action Plan, for the period 2006-2010, for the protection and welfare of animals.

Briefly, the most significant change has been shifting the general approach of legislation, that has become progressively more independent from sanitary needs and focused on granting animals the possibility to express their behavioural repertoire.

Overall, Sweden, Norway and the UK tend to take the lead, having stricter regulations for all farm animals covered by EU regulations (Bock and van Leeuwen, 2005) whereas in other countries like Italy the regulations are at the level of European standards⁷ (Veissier et al., 2008). Moreover, a number of animal welfare schemes have been promoted and developed in Europe by non-governmental animal protection organisations in co-operation with the food industry. Among these we can distinguish: schemes that focus only on animal welfare (e.g. Freedom Foods; Neuland), schemes that focus on various aspects including animal welfare (e.g. organic labelling; Label Rouge in France, Shechita in U.K.) and schemes that focus on aspects different from animal welfare but have some positive side-effects on animal welfare (e.g. certain EU PDO/ PGI schemes). Although in Italy no distribution chain has specific schemes that focus only on animal welfare, as it happens in other European countries, some chains (Natura Si, Esselunga, Coop, Conad) offer a range of so-called animal friendly products⁸, while in other sales points these foods are very limited (Despar, Proda, Sigma, Standa, GS-Carrefour). These products do not carry special statements on animal welfare, nor refer to regulated definitions, but embrace a number of information on the type of farming in which the animal is grown (e.g. outdoor, extensive) or to the sort of feed given. Moreover, the animal friendly brand is never used explicitly as a strategic factor, but appears alongside with other elements, such as sanitary aspects and organoleptic characteristics of the product.

Therefore it is legitimate to think that an anthropocentric idea of animal welfare persists in our country. Since higher standards of animal welfare are considered by Italians a contribution to the overall quality of a food product, as well as a commitment to quality of the manufacturer and supplier. Confirmed by the fact that animal welfare is usually accompanied by other product "qualities" such as natural, traditional, environmental friendly and organic; thus responding to several consumers' interests and concerns (Kjærnes et al., 2007).

Support to this hypothesis comes also from a recent study by Arfini, Cernicchiaro and Mancini (2006) on 14 different Italian food retail outlets of modern and traditional distribution, in which they identified 83 products (among beef, pork, poultry, dairy and eggs) showing some information about animal welfare and treatment on the label or packaging. Furthermore the same research highlighted that no retailer had its own label dedicated only to animal welfare, results confirmed also by the findings of Roe and Marsden (2007). This lack can be explained by the relatively low market share that supermarket labels still have in Italy, compared to other European countries (Ac Nielsen, 2005), and by the fact that often animal welfare is just one feature of a much wider scheme of product quality (Arfini et al., 2006).

Italian consumers attitudes toward welfare labelling: some empirical evidences

The European Union, in the 'Action Plan' initiatives on animal welfare, has foreseen the possibility of introducing a system of certification and labeling based on a common European standard. The ultimate goal of such intervention is to develop, through a labeling, an information system for consumers which may help to enhance transparency in the market for animal origin products and

⁶ To date only 7 Italian regions out of 20 have enabled these measures.

⁷ In Italy the protection of animals for purpose of food production is regulated by the Law Decree No. 146/2001, implementing Directive 98/58/EC, and by specific rules on breeding calves, pigs and laying hens.

⁸ The most "authentic" products retrieved in the Italian market are Ovipel eggs (the first Italian company to have created a line of free-range eggs) and the LAIQ trademark products of Legambiente.

promote more informed consumer choices. In this context, the current analysis assumes that the label is among the more direct means to convey information to consumers in an attempt to help them make purchasing and consumption decisions consistent with their needs. However, based on the theoretical considerations proposed earlier, it is clear that the effectiveness of this instrument is closely related to how the information contained therein is perceived, processed and assimilated by consumers. With particular reference to the welfare labeling this part of the work aims to expose the preliminary results of an empirical investigation that analyzed the propensity consumers to use food labels, especially information related to animal welfare. For the data collection a specific questionnaire has been developed and administered to a random sample of 300 consumers living in Southern Italy⁹. A sample proportionally stratified by age, education and type of outlet was utilized to obtain information. The final version of the questionnaire consists of 30 questions structured into four distinct parts. In the first part, the criteria that influence purchasing decisions and consumption patterns of respondents were analyzed, with a focus on meat products, paying particular attention to the sensitivity consumers gave to issues relating to animal welfare.

In the second part the attitude of consumers towards food labels has been tested, verifying frequency of reading and their opinion on the clarity, relevance and accuracy of the labels. The third section evaluates the usefulness of labeling as a mean to provide consumers with information on animal welfare, trying also to explore some possible solutions to improve the effectiveness of those messages. Finally, the fourth part collects socio-demographic information. With regard to the latter the interviewed sample is composed mostly of women (consistent with the hypothesis that the female population is generally responsible for food purchasing), aged between 36-55 years, although there is a strong component of younger persons, married with children, with an average level of education, more than 50% of them have a diploma from high school, are mainly employed or housewives, with a low-medium annual income (Table N.1). The data were collected between September and November 2008.

Table 1. Sample demographics.

Gender	Male	41,5
	Female	58,5
Age	18-25	8,2
	26-35	20,4
	36-45	24,6
	46-55	18,4
	56-66	16,8
	>66	11,6
	Marital status	Married with children
Married		24,6
Divorced		9,2
Widow		3,8
Education	master	8,5
	Bachelors degree	25,4
	college	57,7
	other	8,4
Occupation	Employee	27,7
	Self employed	21,5
	Housewife	18,5
	Retired	7,7
	Student	10,4
	Other	14,2

⁹ For the purpose of the present paper we used the ISTAT (National Institute of Statistics) definition of Southern Italy that includes Abruzzi, Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania and Molise Regions.

Sensitivity to the issue of animal welfare

To test the sensitivity of respondents to the themes of animal welfare we sought to understand, first, what characteristics exert a greater influence on purchasing decisions of food (of animal origin), offering respondents a set of 10 attributes (both intrinsic and extrinsic) and asking for to express the level of importance on a scale from 1 (very important) to 5 (not at all important). Results show that respondents are particularly sensitive to the freshness, appearance and nutritional value of the products (pointed out as highly relevant in 42.7%, 36.3% and 32,4% of the cases). Considerable importance is also attributed to the origin and in the confidence in the place of purchase, while the farming methods and the type of feeding have a medium importance, respectively, 39.4% and 34.3%.

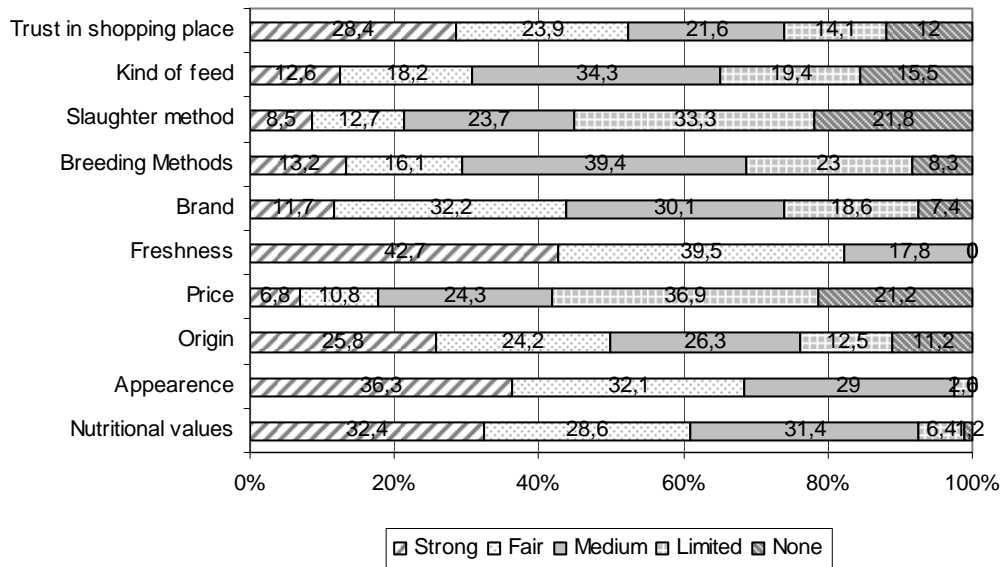


Figure 1. Importance assigned to product's attributes

In the following section the sensitivity of respondents to issues of animal welfare were tested, asking them whether they usually think of the welfare conditions of the animals from which food is made. The survey shows that respondents did not seem particularly interested in the welfare of animals, since only 4.6% answered they always think about it while shopping, while 28% of the respondents stated they do not think at all and 32,6% rarely.

Prevailing, instead, are those who think to animal welfare only occasionally and in relation to specific products (34.8%). This result is in contradiction with the surveys conducted by Eurobarometer (2005; 2007) which show a greater awareness of Italian consumers to such issues as the 51% of respondents had indicated an interest in animal welfare topics. This difference may partly be explained by the fact that the reference sample in this investigation resides exclusively in Southern Italy where the availability of animal friendly foods is still quite scarce and the few products existing, such as free range eggs and organic products, have been introduced very recently in supermarket chains.

It was also asked to indicate the degree of agreement to a series of allegations related to animal welfare, trying to understand how this issue is generally considered. As can be seen from the graph the survey notes that most of the respondents consider animal welfare a central element in determining the level of safety and quality of products of animal origin, confirming the anthropocentric connotation of the theme as noted by other research conducted on the national territory (Miele and Parisi, 2001; Manghi and Gastaldo, 2008; Miele and Ara, 2008).

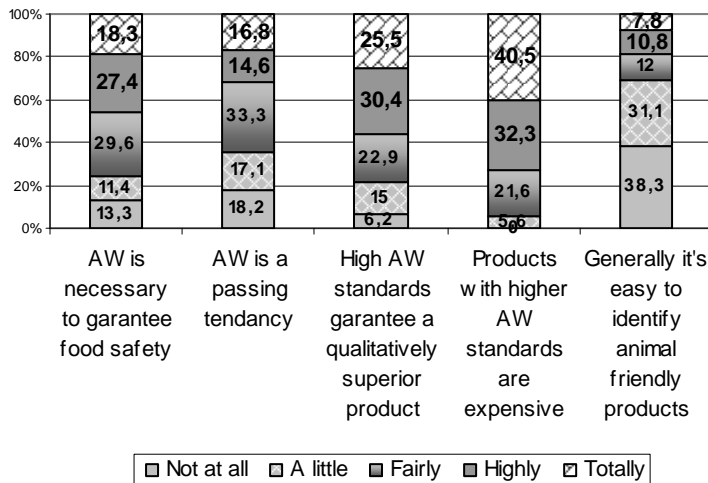


Figure 2. Respondents' degree of agreement on animal welfare issues.

Respondents propensity to animal friendly labelling

Analyzing the variables related to respondents propensity towards food labels a strong interest in the instrument is clearly highlighted, whereas 30% of consumers stated to read always the labels, 26% occasionally, 20% only on the first purchase and only 12% never read them. Relating to the perception of information on food labels respondents were asked to express an opinion on their sufficiency, clarity, accuracy and usefulness. The objective was to verify whether consumers consider food labels really informative and useful in driving their purchasing decisions, or if they perceive them as simply another advertising tool. It was also verified that they are perceived as unclear and poorly provable. From the analysis of the results it appears that the majority of consumers can not always find the needed information on the label (45.8%) and also have some trouble in their interpretation (46%). Moreover consumers state a lack of trust in relation to their accuracy (41,2%). As many as 51.7% believe that the information stated on the label are inadequate and poorly responding to their needs, while an even greater percentage (58.4%) disagreed with the statement of labels' easiness of interpretation and trueness.

In relation to the helpfulness of the information contained in the label, as many as 57.6% of consumers agreed with the statement that only some of the information is really helpful, while other information is considered superfluous, or otherwise poorly related to their needs. In fact about 38% of respondents believe that the majority of the information are only for advertising. These consumers, complain about the excessive presence of advertisements on the labels, which thus limit the space for really useful information and that might limit their clarity. Subsequently we asked respondents to indicate whether they generally find information related to animal welfare on the labels of food products they buy and particularly on which ones. Interesting to highlight is that almost all respondents (93%) said they did not find this type of information on the label and only the remaining 7% said they find this type of information primarily on the labels of poultry and eggs.

In the final part of the questionnaire it was investigated if respondents valued positively finding additional information on the label that assesses animal welfare, which information they would consider to be helpful in this regard and how consumers would prefer to find this information on the label. Concerning the first point 56% of respondents said that they would like to find more information on the label allowing to make more informed choices. In contrast, 21% stated that the current information are enough, while 23% are uncaring to have or not more information. Relating to the type of additional information to be included on the label respondents expressed a clear preference for indications on the use of antibiotics, hormones and growth promoters, considered very important information for 39% of respondents and the type of animal feed, seen in 32% of the cases as very important.

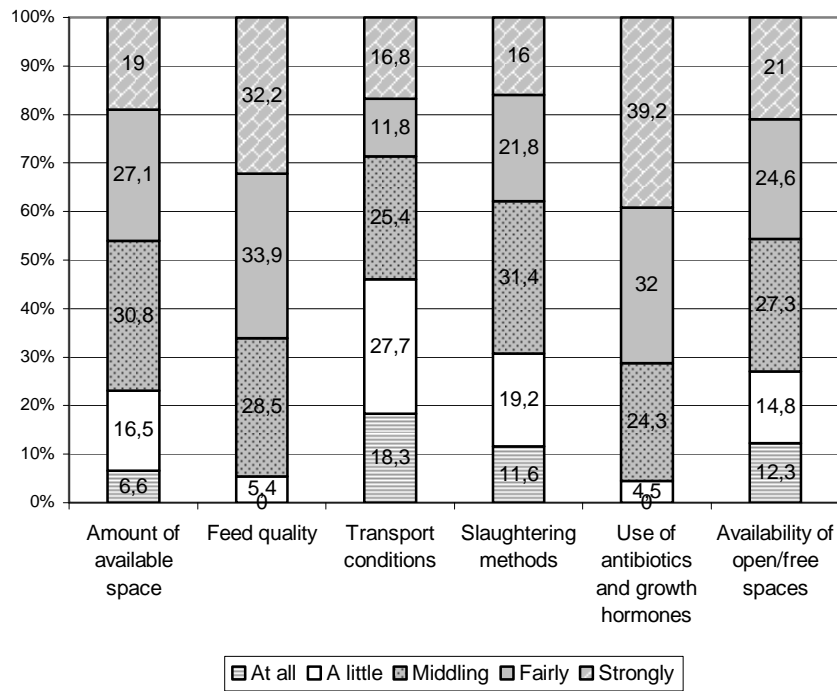


Figure 3. Additional information requested by consumers on the food label.

Differently, low interest has been expressed regarding the transport conditions and the slaughtering method, considered not at all important by respectively 18% and 12% of respondents. Finally, with respect to how to build the animal friendly label consumers were asked to express their preference for the three options offered in the Eurobarometer 2007 research. In most cases (46.7%) consumers indicated as the preferred option the use of a specific logo, followed by the use of a grading/star system (27.5%). While the use of written information (claims) results less suitable for the respondents, in contrast with the findings from the European survey.

Discussion and conclusions

As the distance between farmers and consumers grows with increasing urbanization, consumers know always less about the process through farm animals are raised. However, consumers do care about the way in which their food is produced, including the way farm animals are treated. Increasingly, they require assurances that the well being of animals is taken into account in livestock farming practices.

Concern about animal welfare within the EU, shown by various surveys and studies (Eurobarometer, 2005, 2007), has been reflected by the increasing amount of legislation and policy initiatives. Within this context the EU, in the recent 'Action Plan' initiatives on animal welfare, envisaged the possibility of introducing a system of certification and labelling based on a common European standard that provides adequate information about the production practices used and their animal welfare implications.

Since the majority of European citizens share generally similar opinions in terms of animal welfare attributes appropriate labelling, identifying the level of animal welfare applied and based on a scientific approach, could facilitate the wish of consumers to make informed choices. Moreover, an effective and clear animal-friendly label should allow consumers to easily differentiate between products obtained with basic mandatory animal welfare standards and those with higher standards. The current empirical study shows that although the investigated sample states to be interested in

more information related to animal welfare, consumers generally do not think about animal welfare when going food shopping and do not like to think that meat came from a live animal. These results are consistent with other national and European researches (Miele and Parisi, 2001; Menghi et al., 2006; Mayfield et al., 2007; Napolitano et al., 2007). On the other hand our paper highlights that the majority of respondents would like to find more information on animal welfare standards on the food label and is clearly interested in additional information on the use of antibiotics, hormones and growth promoters in animal feed. Hence consumers do not have adequate information on which they can base their purchasing decisions to satisfy their preferences concerning the animal welfare provenance of the food they eat. Therefore our findings support the idea of an animal welfare labelling scheme for food products within the EU. However, as previous studies have demonstrated (Eurobarometer, 2005; Mayfield et al., 2007), individuals tend to respond to this type of questionnaires as citizens and in this role, they claim to pay more attention to animal welfare. Showing an almost classic separation between expressed concern and actual purchasing behavior (Te Velde et al., 2002; Vanhonacker and Verbeke, 2007). Additionally, the current paper, although restricted to a specific geographical area, confirms that uncertainty over consumer reaction and willingness to pay for more stringent animal welfare standards remains strong. Hence, in situations of ambiguity, organizations tend to model themselves following similar organizations that they perceive to be more legitimate or successful (Ransom, 2007). This can best be seen within the U.S. fast food retail sector where the leader company McDonald's, was the first to implement animal welfare standards and audits for all suppliers. Shortly thereafter the other major fast food chains followed, including Wendy's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Burger King. A similar trend can, recently, be seen among the major grocery retailers in Europe and could allow to believe that the supply is anticipating policy initiatives to satisfy a growing market.

Limitations of the present work are surely related to the sample, quite modest in terms of total amount of respondents and not representative of the national population. Furthermore, a supplementary qualitative analysis (through focus groups and deep interviews with opinion leaders) would have given the final results a more general significance. Nonetheless the study offers some contribute to a small national literature on the subject, and suggests interesting new research avenues.

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